

REMARKS BY SECRETARY (EAST)
Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

AT THE

ROUND TABLE SESSION
ON INDIA'S ROLE IN WEST ASIA

ORGANISED BY
OVAL OBSERVER FOUNDATION

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to be amidst you when we will discuss issues of topical importance for the West Asia region. I would like to thank OOF for organizing this Round Table on India's Policy on West Asia which is apt in its timing and will help us understand the complex nuances of the evolving developments in a cohesive manner. The recent visit of our Prime Minister to the Gulf region and the just concluded visit of the External Affairs Minister to Egypt have reinforced the strategic importance of this region for India.

2. India shares deep historical, cultural and civilizational links with West Asia. India's civilizational links to the Arab world can be traced to the very beginning of the recorded history. Archaeologists have dug up evidence of trade links between Indus Civilization and Dilmun in the Gulf. Continuing archaeological excavations in and around the Red Sea coast continuously throw up more evidence of even older links between the two civilizations. Indian numerals were first borrowed by the Arabs from Bharat and then were introduced to Europe. For India, West Asia is part of our extended neighbourhood and as such continued peace and stability in the region is in our strategic interest.

3. To highlight the depth of our engagement with West Asia, the region is home to more than 7 million Indians, who contribute around US\$ 40 billion in remittances annually. Our economic and commercial engagement with the region is around US\$ 186 billion per annum (2013-14), making it the largest

trading regional block. The region is a source for more than 60 per cent of our oil and gas requirement, critical for our energy security. The Maghreb region is a major source of phosphatic and other fertilizers, a significant factor in our food security. The sizable Sovereign Wealth Funds of Gulf countries can offer significant platform for operations of Indian companies, particularly in infrastructure, important for our socio-economic development and other national initiatives like 'Make in India' 'Digital India' 'Smart Cities', etc. There is an increased air connectivity and tourism prospects between the two sides. Industry figure illustrate that there are 700 flights a week between India and UAE. Dhows of yester years have now added container ship. Air connectivity is robust and vibrant, increasing every month. India has also been participating in important UN Peace Keeping Missions in the region especially in Lebanon, Syria and South Sudan.

4. The West Asia region, post-'Arab Spring,' is in a state of flux and uncertainty, which heightens the difficulty in fully assessing the overall impact of unfolding events. After over four years of 'Arab Spring,' the earlier exaggerated expectations of progress towards democracy have turned out to be misplaced. On the whole, 'Arab Spring' has exacerbated the regional fault lines initially created by the Colonial powers in the aftermath of World War I, heightened regional rivalries with competing ideologies and skewed the regional balance of power. The surge of Islamic State (IS), gaining control over large swathes of territory in Iraq, Syria and Northern Africa, is threatening to jolt the geo-political paradigm. Recent flare-up of fighting in Yemen and on-going civil war in Syria and Libya only highlights the complexity and severity of the crisis. Militia infighting in Libya has seen Islamists pitted against tribal and pro-democracy rebel groups, thus threatening wider regional stability. There are a large number of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq from around 83 countries. The easy mobility of extremists and rising number of foreign jihadis in the region has increased fears of the possibility of the spread of radicalism in the home countries of foreign fighters.

5. Our policy in the region remains rooted in our traditional long-standing ties with the region and is non-prescriptive and non-judgmental. Despite ever emerging challenges, our bilateral relations with virtually all countries of the region have been progressing structurally and we have managed to insulate our core interests from the negative fall-out of regional developments. India

acknowledges that the political future discourse taking into account popular aspirations in the countries has to be determined from within and without any external interference or influence. While India is not in the business of exporting democracy, promotion of democratic ideals may be in alignment with India's belief in these principles.

6. On the policy option front, there are challenges for India. We fully acknowledge that the complex challenges of the region require a multi-thronged approach and hence our efforts to outreach to a whole cross-section of society, including think tanks, universities, academics and media towards a consolidated policy formulation. I will now delve briefly into some key elements of our policy options:

(i) It needs to be understood that "old order neutrality" is not absence of decision-making or political passivity. India has been asked to play more active role in the Middle East but we need to assess this based on our strategic leverages and realistic consideration of our strengths and limitations. We would not wish to create parallel mechanisms that will affect our bilateral relations.

(ii) India remains cautious that our approach towards the region should not be misconstrued as being partisan or sectarian, as India has stayed out of any regional alliances based on sectarian or other similar considerations. We need to be sensitive to the perceptions of our own religious and ethnic mix in the population. At the same time, given the sectarian volatility in the region, we should remain prepared for any fundamental/sectarian backlash coming from the region.

(iii) India is enhancing its high-level G2G contacts with all the countries in West Asia keeping in view our larger diaspora, energy and security interests in the region. There have been high-level state/official visits from some key regional countries over the last two years, including that of President of Egypt (March 2013); Prime Ministers of Iraq (August 2013) and Kuwait (November 2013); King of Bahrain (February 2014), Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia (February 2014) and Emir of Qatar (March 2015). Our External Affairs Minister has visited some key countries in the region, most recently Egypt as well as Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan. Foreign Ministers of Oman, Bahrain, UAE

and Egypt have visited India. This regular exchange of high-level visits has further cemented our bilateral relationships.

(iv) The Government is committed to protect the interests of Indian expatriates in the Gulf and Middle East countries. These steps include, inter alia, working closely with the local authorities and employers, putting in place requisite institutional bilateral mechanisms, community outreach, initiation of Indian Community Welfare Funds and rendering regular consular assistance. We have made concerted efforts to enter into bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with all the major destination countries to enlist the commitment of the host governments to ensure better protection and welfare of Indian emigrants. There are MoUs with UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. An agreement on labour cooperation for domestic workers recruitment was signed with Saudi Arabia in January 2014.

(v) India remains strongly committed to a stable, peaceful and democratic Yemen, which is in the interest of global and regional peace and security. India has urged all concerned parties in the conflict to resolve their differences amicably and abide by the relevant UN resolution, the terms of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement and the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference. India has successfully carried out the evacuation exercise for 4,741 Indian nationals as well as 1,947 foreign nationals from 48 countries through 'Operation Rahat' which I was personally associated with over two weeks.

(vi) We have noted that the situation is slowly stabilizing in Egypt. There is a commitment on part of its leadership for political stabilization and economic revival. We are encouraged at the progress in the implementation of political transitional roadmap with the adoption of new Constitution and conduct of Presidential elections. The holding up of Parliamentary elections at an early date will be important next step.

(vii) India supports a UN-backed, Syrian-led comprehensive political settlement taking into account the aspirations of the Syrian people in Syria. We firmly believe that there can be no military solution to the crisis. India participated in Geneva-II and has contributed financially towards humanitarian assistance and destruction of chemical weapons. We support the efforts of UN Special Envoy for Syria in the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

(viii) India has consistent policy on Israel-Palestine. India's policy is of extending strong support to the Palestinian cause, while maintaining good relations with Israel. India supports a comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian issue, leading to a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel, as endorsed in the Quartet Roadmap and relevant UNSC Resolutions. We have called on both sides to resume the stalled peace process. On Israel-Gaza conflict of last summer, India expressed deep concern at the loss of large number of civilian lives in Gaza. India pledged US\$ 4 million at the Cairo International Conference on Gaza Reconstruction in October 2014 and also honoured its commitment in January 2015. Apart from strong political support to the Palestinian cause at international, regional and bilateral levels, India has been contributing budgetary, economic and developmental assistance to Palestine.

(ix) The ISIS take-over of large swathes of northern Iraq and creation of territorial contiguity with north-eastern Syria has serious ramifications for the region, with heightened extremist and sectarian overtones. We have expressed our firm support to Iraq in its fight against international terrorism and efforts to preserve its unity and territorial integrity. We are hopeful that an inclusive political arrangement will help easing the conflict. In view of the security situation, the government has assisted over 7,000 Indians in returning from Iraq. However, the safety of the 39 Indian nationals in captivity remains a matter of foremost concern, and the government is making all efforts for their release.

(x) Libya, in post-revolution period, is witnessing extreme divisive tendencies shrouded in tribalism, religious fanaticism, regionalism and more recently, extreme forms of militia violence. The intensified militia warfare and in-fighting in Libya ongoing since July 2014 is of grave concern to us. The government initiated a detailed assistance plan for the safe exit of the Indian nationals trapped in the conflict. So far, of the 6,500 Indians at the time of the commencement of the conflict, around 3,600 have been evacuated. The remaining Indians, despite persistent Embassy Advisories, have refused to leave for economic reasons. Recently, four Indians were detained by militia in Sirte last month. While the release of two of them was secured promptly, two still remain in

captivity. The Government is making all efforts to secure their release and is in touch with various stakeholders.

(xi) As for the external players, India believes that US, despite its pivot towards Asia-Pacific region, remains an important player for regional stability (i.e. fight against IS, security of Israel). Other countries have attempted to re-engage and may have gained in appeal as a counterweight to the West in the region. However, there is question on their economic capability and sustainability. Some of these countries may be making a strong economic and military thrust in the region, including for consolidation of oil interests. But their readiness for a strong political role in the region remains to be seen.

(xii) India has welcomed the successful conclusion of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue as it addresses a contentious issue through peaceful negotiations and mutual agreement. The announcement of July 14 also underlines the success of diplomacy and dialogue, which India has always supported. We are optimistic that the agreement would be implemented in good faith and would lead to a permanent resolution of this long standing issue. Further, we underscore the important role of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the agreement's implementation and the virulent rebuilding of international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear activities.

(xiii) Islamic State (IS) is a new type of virulent terrorist manifestation. India believes that the only solution to this threat can be through a larger political approach requiring a consolidated, rather than fragmented perspective, including intelligence sharing; counter-terrorism; cyber-space cooperation for containment of outbound flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria; developing a legal framework for fighting terrorism at national and international level (including early adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism); tracking of financial flows; and humanitarian assistance. So far, the efforts of IS to gain recruits from India has met with limited success largely owing to our own pluralist society and inclusive democratic experience. There are reported to be a small number of Indian jihadi fighters in Iraqi-Syrian war zones, but the Government is taking measures to control this through

immigration controls, intelligence sharing, and liaison with state Governments.

(xiv) In view of the situation in the region, new areas of defence and security cooperation have emerged which include counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, piracy, money laundering, small arms smuggling, financing terror activities, etc. Specific measures for strengthening institutional security mechanisms can include: greater naval presence in the region; regular participation in Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings; stronger regional cooperation through naval assets in the Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea for protection of maritime trade.

(xv) India believes that political instability can be offset through greater economic engagement with the region. While India's regional trade volumes have increased, considerable untapped potential remains.

(xvi) The Indian diaspora in the region has become the most preferred work force due to their hard working nature and sense of dedication and commitment. Their contribution in the development of their host countries has earned tremendous goodwill for India. It has also helped in furthering our bilateral relations with these countries.

(xvii) We will continue our efforts to further our mutually beneficial political, economic and security ties with North African countries including Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Sudan. New economic cooperation areas are pharmaceuticals, automobiles, infrastructure, power and renewable energy.

(xviii) We shall continue our cooperation with Somalia on anti-piracy and hostage issue. Importantly, the last of the remaining 7 Indian seafarers in captivity in Somalia were released in October 2014, after four years in captivity.

(xix) We have laid out a strong foundation for our relationship collectively with the Arab League, through the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation and an Executive Programme in December 2013, covering the fields of political consultations, trade and investments, media and culture. The First India-Arab Ministerial Conference will be held in December 2015 in Manama, Bahrain.

7. In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that India attaches high priority to its political, economic, and security relations with the

countries of the West Asia region. I remain optimistic that our bilateral relations with the countries in West Asia are poised to grow, given the enormous potential on both sides. However, the broader context in which we seek to pursue our vital interests in West Asia is fraught and unpredictable making our task so much more challenging and daunting.

8. I look forward to hearing from the learned speakers on this pertinent topic and gain new insights on their regional perspective as also to listen to views on how and why India needs to engage in other ways with this region.

Thank you!
